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SUBJECT: BOLIVIAN OPPOSITION MOSTLY RESIGNED TO MORALES VICTORY, SUPPORTS U.S. POSTURE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. John Creamer, reasons 1.4b,d

¶1. (C) Summary: Meetings September 23-24 with leading Bolivian opposition figures in Santa Cruz underscored their subdued mood two months ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections. Almost all believe that President Morales will be easily re-elected to a second term and that his MAS party will emerge stronger than ever. Some, such as leading opposition candidate Manfred Reyes Villa, sought -- unconvincingly -- to persuade us that discontent with the current government (whose approval ratings remain at 60 percent or higher) would translate into opposition gains, but these voices were in the minority. Reyes Villa, fellow opposition figures and Santa Cruz business leaders strongly endorsed the U.S. government's restraint in engaging the GOB despite frequent provocations, observing that public conflict between the U.S. and Bolivia serves only the interests of MAS hardliners. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On the margins of the annual trade fair "Expocruz" in Santa Cruz (the unofficial capital of Bolivia's political opposition), Polcouns met September 23-24 with opposition and business leaders and confirmed that most have resigned themselves to a second Morales term. With the exception of presidential candidate Reyes Villa, none predicted victory in December elections, acknowledging -- sometimes bitterly -- Morales's formidable advantages in a resilient economy, broad popular support, and the powers of incumbency. Several suggested that the opposition would manage to maintain control of the Senate, but even this is uncertain. Recent polling indicates that the MAS is likely to win a Senate majority.

¶3. (C) Opposition senate candidate (and former presidential candidate, having withdrawn in favor of Reyes Villa) German Antelo was sharply critical of the opposition's failure to unite, as well as of divisions and extremism among his own Santa Cruz supporters. Reyes Villa expressed frustration that he has been unable to convince the second-ranking opposition presidential candidate (Samuel Doria Medina) to step aside, implicitly acknowledging his candidacy's long odds and undercutting his own confident assertions of victory. A national opinion survey published September 28 put Reyes Villa's support at just 20 percent, compared to 54 percent for Morales and 11 percent for Doria Medina.

¶4. (C) Reyes Villa predicted a hard-fought election contest and a ruthless, no-holds-barred campaign by Morales.

Reviewing his forthcoming visit to the United States (set for September 30), Reyes Villa indicated that he would be seeking to enlist the services of an American political strategist, someone "along the lines of Dick Morris" (if not Morris himself), to help combat the expected MAS onslaught.

¶ 15. (C) Reyes Villa said he planned to pursue with the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights the case of his running mate, jailed former Pando governor Leopoldo Fernandez. This would be done to highlight Fernandez's status as a "political prisoner," rather than out of any expectation of OAS action in his case. Indeed, Reyes Villa observed that Fernandez is more valuable to his campaign in prison (as a symbol of alleged GOB abuse) than he would be on the hustings. Although clearly interested in presenting himself as an ally of the United States, Reyes Villa indicated that he recognized the political dangers of any U.S. involvement in the campaign. He agreed that the U.S. has been wise not to respond publicly to GOB provocations, especially in advance of elections, arguing that such conflict is exactly what the MAS seeks and thrives upon.

¶ 16. (C) Santa Cruz Cardinal Julio Terrazas, an outspoken critic of the government, echoed Reyes Villa's observations about the advisability of discretion in the face of GOB attacks. Terrazas urged the U.S. to continue USAID programs despite the government's apparent opposition, observing that such humanitarian assistance is urgently needed in Bolivia. He expressed understanding for the U.S. decision on ATPDEA withdrawal, but said the action has hit some low-income groups the hardest. Terrazas reported that he and his parishes have noted a marked increase in drug production and trafficking in his archdiocese, expressing distress at what he described as the growing social costs of the trade.

¶ 17. (C) Comment: With polls continuing to point to a solid MAS victory in December, the reality of their grim situation is increasingly evident to Bolivian opposition leaders, even as they are beginning to gear up for their campaigns. Although unable to field a serious challenger to Morales or overcome their own internal divisions, the opposition appears to recognize that no external power will reverse their fortunes, and that any efforts to draw the United States into the campaign (so far the exclusive tactic of the MAS) are likely to backfire.

CREAMER